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A Sketch of the Life of

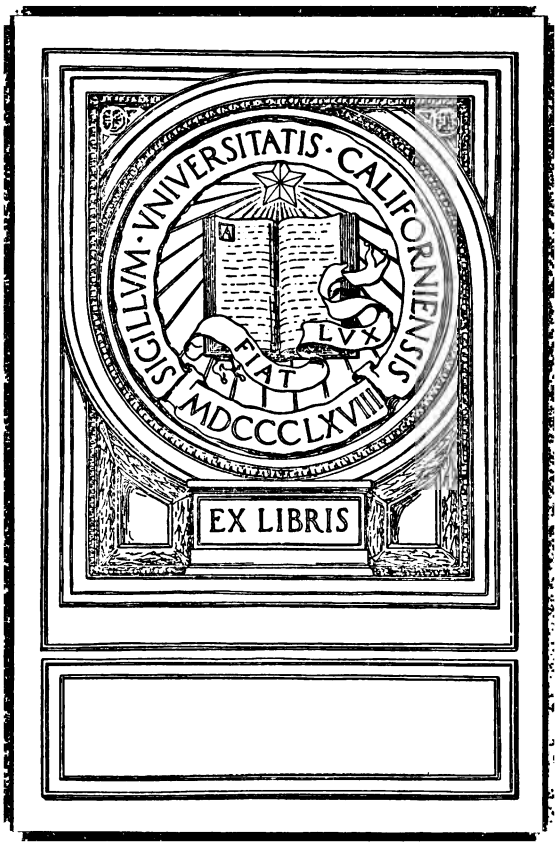
John Gilbert

TOGETHER WITH EXTRACTS FROM HIS LETTERS AND SOUVENIRS OF HIS CAREER

BY

WILLIAM WINTER

Publications of the Dunlap Society. No. 11.
New York, 1890.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JOHN GILBERT.

NOTE.

A part of the material that I have used in making this memoir of John Gilbert was originally contributed by me to the New York "Tribune," with which journal I have had the honor of being associated since July, 1865, as a reviewer of the acted drama and an essayist upon subjects connected with the Stage. In giving the letters from Gilbert I have considered that this book is privately printed, and that it goes to a select brotherhood of readers with whom I may venture to communicate in a confidential manner.

W. W.

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MR. JOHN GILBERT

AS SIR PETER TEAZLE.

A SKETCH OF THE LIFE

OF

JOHN GILBERT

TOGETHER WITH EXTRACTS FROM HIS LETTERS
AND SOUVENIRS OF HIS CAREER

BY

WILLIAM WINTER

"We, whose theatric days fly ever fleeter,
Whose gaze along the past grows faint and dim,
Have seen our last Sir Robert and Sir Peter—
Polonius dies with him."

—O. C. WYMAN.

NEW-YORK
THE DUNLAP SOCIETY
1890

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This Memorial of the

LIFE OF JOHN GILBERT

Is Dedicated to "The Players"

WITH WHOM HE DELIGHTED TO MEET;

BY WHOM HE WAS LOVED AND HONORED;

AND WHO REVERE HIS MEMORY.

"*Ergo Quinctilium perpetuus sopor*
Urget! . . . . .
Durum! Sed levius fit patientia
Quidquid corrigere est nefas."

—HORACE. Book I. Ode xxiv.

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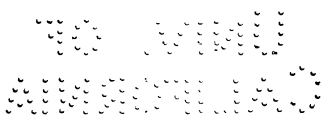

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John Gilbert.

THE death of John Gilbert [June 17, 1889, at Boston], although an event rationally to be expected — for he was close on eighty years of age — comes upon the community with a painful shock and diffuses a bleak sense of loneliness and grief. The actor, the gentleman, the friend whom we shall never any more behold in his accustomed places, had lived with us a long time; had become entwined with some of our most precious memories and associations; and had grown to be as essential to the fullness of our enjoyment as he was dear to our reverent affection. His death deprives us of a cherished source of happiness — more to be realized than ever now that it must ever be deplored — breaks a tender tie of regard, and mournfully points the moral of the evanescence of life. The grand figures with which we have been familiar are vanishing, one by one. The institutions and the ways of our personal world are breaking up around us. New men and new ideas and interests are thrusting aside the broken fragments of our past. The shadows darken around us. A little later we

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shall be shadows ourselves. In the sad twilight of an event so melancholy yet so natural as the death of this veteran actor and honored and cherished associate, this is the grim truth that whispers coldly to our hearts. The death of John Gilbert marks an epoch in the experience of the generation that is passing away — solemnly warning it of its own decline. It marks also an epoch in the history of the American stage; for John Gilbert had been an actor for close on sixty-one years, and within his time the art of acting [exemplifying its customary periodicity of flow and ebb] had risen to a climax, and had begun to wane.

John Gibbs Gilbert was a native of Boston, born February 27, 1810. His birth occurred in a house in Richmond street, next to that in which Charlotte Cushman was born, and these two — afterward so famous actors — were playmates in childhood. Gilbert went on the stage in his nineteenth year, making his first appearance November 28, 1828, at the Tremont Theater, in Boston. The play was Otway's tragedy of "Venice Preserved," and Gilbert acted *Jaffier*. The *Belvidera* was Mary Duff — one of the best actresses that ever adorned the stage — a woman as eminent in her day as Cushman and Ristori have been in our time, and worthy to be remembered with the most illustrious of dramatic artists. His next characters were *Sir Edward Mortimer*, in "The Iron Chest," and Shakespeare's *Shylock*. He continued for the rest of the season of 1828 to act at the Tremont Theater, taking all parts that were cast to him; but in the fall of that year he joined the company at the

Camp Street Theater, New Orleans, under Caldwell's management, and during the ensuing five years he acted with that troop, sometimes in New Orleans, sometimes in towns on the Mississippi River — playing all sorts of parts, but gradually drifting into the line of old men. On his return to Boston, in 1834, he again came forward at the Tremont Theater, acting *Mr. Dornton*, in "The Road to Ruin." The occasion was that of a benefit to George Barrett — a favorite comedian of that epoch. The Tremont was then managed by Thomas Barry — recently [February 11, 1876], full of years and honors, borne to his rest. Gilbert was at once engaged there, and there he remained for the next five years. His line of parts at that time comprehended tragedy as well as comedy, but his tendency was toward the specialty of first old men — in which for many years he had no equal and scarcely a rival. Blake was the only actor of his time who ever surpassed him in this line, and Blake could excel him only in certain unctuous parts or in parts of great tenderness. The versatility of his talents and the variety of his efforts at that time are denoted by the list of parts which he acted during the first season with Barry. This includes *Master Walter*, *Isaac of York*, *Sir Peter Teazle*, *Pizarro*, *Iago*, *Sir Edward Mortimer*, *Admiral Kingston*, *Lieutenant Worthington*, *Sir Robert Bramble*, *Polonius*, *Uncle John*, *Tom Noddy*, *Macduff*, *Mr. Dornton*, *Squeers*, *Henry the Sixth*, *Adam*, *Malec*, *Kent*, and *Rolanio*. Barry relinquished the Tremont Theater after two seasons, and Dr. Jones, author of "Solon Shingle" and many other pieces, and long well known

and popular in Boston, became its lessee. Gilbert was engaged as stage-manager, and to act the same round of parts. Two seasons later the theater passed into the hands of George H. Andrews, the comedian, for one term; but Dr. Jones resumed its management in the next year and wound up its affairs. Gilbert remained in it, and on its final night as a theater he acted *Sir Robert Bramble* and pronounced a farewell address; so that he was the last actor that spoke upon the stage of the old Tremont. The building was purchased by a church society, and being rented for lectures, with theatrical scenery, it was reopened with a hymn, beginning "Lord, let these ransomed walls rejoice!"

A little while previous to the disruption of the Tremont Gilbert acted at the Bowery Theater, New-York — under Hamblin's management — having been expressly engaged to personate the sexton, *Peter Bradley*, in "Rookwood." He made his first appearance there, however, as *Sir Edward Mortimer*. His next engagement after the Tremont closed was at Pelby's National, in Boston — the only theater then open in that city. From there he went to the Federal Street Theater, when that once-famous house — long since swept away — was reopened by Oliver C. Wyman, and on that occasion he spoke the opening address, written by Frances Sargent Osgood. The season was disastrous and it closed in March, 1846. In April, that year, Gilbert went to London, on a pleasure trip; but, being asked to act, he appeared at the Princess's Theater as *Sir Robert Bramble*, and was cordially received by the

public and the press; whereupon he accepted an engagement at the Princess's Theater for the next season. The interim he passed in Paris, where he saw and studied the artists of the Théâtre Français — Rachel, Rose Chéri, Lafont, Frederick Lemaître, Bocage, Fechter and others. Then he acted for one season at the Princess's in London, and then returned home.

He is next found at the Park Theater, in New-York, where he came forward as *Sir Anthony Absolute*, and where he remained till the destruction of that house by fire — December 16, 1848. He spoke the last words that were ever uttered on that stage, acting *Admiral Kingston* in "Naval Engagements." Hamblin then engaged him at the Bowery, which in those days was a theater of the best class and possessed a capital dramatic company, including Mr. and Mrs. James W. Wallack, Jr., Lester Wallack, Miss Wemyss, Mary Taylor, and others of local renown. Here he remained some time; but he is presently found at the Howard Athenæum, Boston, and later at the Chestnut Street Theater, Philadelphia. At the latter he remained till the opening of the Boston Theater, in 1854, when he was again engaged by Barry. On the opening night of that theater he spoke the address written by that rare poet T. W. Parsons, and acted *Sir Anthony Absolute*. Four consecutive seasons found him constant in his duties at that theater and growing more and more in the affectionate respect of the Boston public. He played the old men almost exclusively; yet he was now seen in two of the most widely contrasted and difficult characters in the range of the

drama — *Bottom* and *Caliban*. "The humor of Gilbert's performance of *Bottom*," says a critical authority of the time, "was exquisite. The egregious vanity in the casting of the play — the bottomless vanity and Bottomish ignorance — were never more faithfully denoted. It had the true Shakespearean flavor." Another critical writer says: "Gilbert's *Caliban* is a great personation. Of itself and by itself it is just as good in its way as anything Forrest or Brooke or Wallack can accomplish. It is a finished and elaborate yet very vigorous exhibition of dramatic ability; and those who have not seen it are not aware of what John Gilbert is capable, although they may be thoroughly conversant with his *Philip Sabois*, *Rolanio*, *Sir Peter Teazle*, *Sir Anthony Absolute*, and half a hundred other parts that he gives so delicately and so naturally." At one of his benefits in Boston, during this fertile and brilliant period of his professional life, Gilbert received a public gift of a costly service of silver plate. It was during his stay at the Boston Theater that Edwin Forrest, who was his enemy, paid him the compliment of invariably stipulating, in the written contracts under which the tragedian came there to play "star engagements," that John Gilbert should not appear in any performance given by him. This was because Gilbert had approved of the cause of Mrs. Forrest, in the once notorious divorce suit.

From the Boston Theater, in 1858, the comedian went to the Arch in Philadelphia, and there he remained till engaged by the elder Wallack, for the house opened by him in Broadway, at the corner of Thirteenth street.

in 1861. Gilbert came forward as *Sir Peter Teazle*, and at once established himself in the admiration of the New-York public. He remained attached to Wallack's Theater until it ceased to exist — in 1888. From him chiefly the present generation of playgoers received its knowledge of the best traditions of the stage, as associated with the old men of the old comedies; and their recollections of these subjects are intertwined with his honored name.

Gilbert was twice married, but he left no children. His first wife was Miss Campbell, a native of Philadelphia, born in 1806. With her he wedded in 1836. This lady became an actress, appearing at the Tremont Theater, Boston, as *Sophie*, in "Of Age To-morrow," and on March 15, 1842, at the Bowery Theater, New-York, as *Old Lady Lambert*, in "The Hypocrite." She visited England with her husband in 1846 and was seen at the Princess's Theater, as *Mrs. Lillywhite*, in "Forty or Fifty." Her death occurred on April 27, 1866, in New-York, and she was buried near Boston. Gilbert subsequently espoused Sarah H. Gavett, of Boston, who survives him. In his married life, as in all other ways, he was fortunate and happy. I have been with him in his home, at Manchester-by-the-Sea, and I remember it as the favored abode of affection and peace.

The long annals of the British stage are opened the moment we begin to review Gilbert's achievements, to analyze his art, and to consider his professional rank. Quin, Dowton, Munden, Liston, Reeves, Farren, Burton, Blake, Hackett, Burke, and Bass are some of the

renowned names which start up in imagination or remembrance, as the ancestry or brotherhood of this remarkable man. How full of labor John Gilbert's professional life has been — how high in quality, and therefore how refining and elevating in influence, equally upon his own character and upon the public mind — may be gathered from a glance at some of the parts he played. The list includes *King John*, *Hubert*, *King Philip*, *Cardinal Pandulph*, *Sir Peter Teazle*, *Sir Oliver Surface*, *Crabtree*, *Rowley*, *Sir Anthony Absolute*, *Kit Cosey*, *Sir William Dorrilon*, *Lord Pleony*, *Sir William Fondlove*, *Sir John Falstaff*, *Justice Woodcock*, *Malvolio*, *Polonius*, *The Ghost of King Hamlet*, *Dogberry*, *Adam*, *Leontes*, *Antigonus*, *Autolycus*, *Mr. Simpson*, *Lord Duberley*, *Tom Noddy*, *Captain Copp*, *Colonel Hardy*, *Governor Heartall*, *Sir Bashful Constant*, *Lord Ogleby*, *Dr. Cantwell*, *Sir Robert Bramble*, *Sir Francis Gripe*, *Squeers*, *Mr. Dombey*, *Justice Greedy*, *Colonel Damas*, *Admiral Kingston*, *Don Manuel*, *Mr. Hardcastle*, *Shylock*, *Sir Edward Mortimer*, *Dr. Dilworth*, *Sir Paul Pagoda*, *Sir Paladin Scruple*, *Sir Harcourt Courtley*, *Sarcasm*, *Dominie Sampson*, *Baillie Nicol Jarvie*, *Sir Alexander Shendryn*, *Penruddock*, *Adrastus*, *Iago*, *Master Walter*, *Matthew Elmore*, *Henry VIII.*, *Cardinal Wolsey*, *Jacques*, *Adam Brock*, *Old Norval*, *Job Thornberry*, *Jesse Rural*, *Menenius*, *Adam Winterton*, *Mr. Dowton*, *Old Rapid*, *Mr. Aspen*, *Mr. Coddle*, *Macbeth*, all the parts in the tragedy of "Macbeth," except *Lady Macbeth* and the waiting gentlewoman, and all the parts in "Julius Cæsar," except the boy *Lucius*. This is but a tithe of the

veteran's toils; yet it lays bare the springs of that renown which is the pride of John Gilbert's contemporaries and surviving friends, and which will always adorn and illumine the annals of dramatic history.

One of the most pleasing events of Gilbert's life was the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his first appearance on the stage. This was commemorated by a banquet at the Lotos Club, N. Y., on November 30, 1878, and by a benefit performance at Wallack's Theater. At the banquet,—the Hon. Whitelaw Reid presiding,—among others present were John Brougham, Lester Wallack, John McCullough, William Davidge, Junius B. Booth, Henry Beckett, and W. R. Floyd—all of whom have since passed away. Gilbert, on that occasion, delivered the following speech:

"Cæsar, we, who are about to die, salute you!" Such the gladiators' cry in the arena, standing face to face with death. There is a certain appositeness in the words I have just uttered. Understand me, I do not mean to die theatrically at present. But when a man has arrived at my age he can scarcely look forward to many years of professional exertion. When my old friend John Brougham announced to me the honor that the Lotos Club proffered me I was flattered and complimented. But I said, "John, you know I am no speechmaker." He replied, "Say anything." "Anything," I said, "anything won't do." "Then," said he, "repeat the first speech of *Sir Peter Teazle*, 'When an old bachelor marries a young wife, what is he to expect?'" Well, I think I can paraphrase that and say, "When a young man enters

the theatrical profession, what is he to expect?" Well, he may expect many things that are never realized.

Fifty years ago I made my début as an actor in my native city of Boston. I began in the first-class character of *Jaffier*, in Otway's tragedy of "Venice Preserved." The public said it was a success, and I thought it was. The manager evidently thought it was, too, for he let me repeat the character. Well, I suppose it was a success for a young man with such aspirations as I had. There might have been some inspiration about it — at least there ought to have been, for the lady who personated *Belvidera* was Mrs. Duff, a lovely woman and the most exquisite tragic actress that I ever saw, from that period to the present. After this I acted two or three parts — *Mortimer*, *Shylock*, and some of those trifling characters — with comparative success. But shortly after, and wisely, I went into the ranks to study my profession — not to begin at the top and go to the bottom, but to begin at the bottom and go to the top if possible. As a young man I sought for pastures fresh and new. I went to the South and West, my ambition still being, as is that of all youthful aspirants for dramatic honors, for tragedy.

At last I went to a theater where, to my great disgust and indignation, I was cast for an old man — at the age of nineteen. However, I must do it. There was no alternative, and I did it. I received applause. I played a few more old men. I found at last that that was my point, my forte, and I followed

it up, and after this long lapse of years I still continue in that department.

I went to England, and was received with kindness and cordiality. In 1862 I was invited to join Wallack's Theater by the father of my dear friend here (Lester Wallack) — his father, whom I am proud to acknowledge as a friend of mine nearly fifty years ago, and I am also proud to say my dramatic master. I need not tell you that since that time I have been under the direction of his son. What my career has been up to this time you all know. It requires no comment from me. I am no longer a young man, but I do not think I am an old man. I owe this to a good constitution and moderately prudent life. I may say, with Shakespeare's *Adam*, that

> "In my youth I never did apply
> Hot and rebellious liquors in my blood.
> Therefore my age is as a lusty winter, frosty but kindly."

Will you permit me, gentlemen, to thank you for the high honor you have conferred upon me, and to wish health and prosperity and happiness to the Lotos Club.

On the same occasion the following speech and poem were delivered by the author of this memoir:

I thank you gratefully for this kind welcome, and I think it is a privilege to be allowed to take part in a

festival so delightful as this, and to join with you in paying respect to a name so justly renowned and honored as that of John Gilbert. I cannot hope adequately to respond to the personal sentiments which have been so graciously expressed, nor adequately to celebrate the deeds and the virtues of your distinguished guest. "I am ill at these numbers; . . . but such answer as I can make you shall command." For since first I became familiar with the stage — in far-away days, in old Boston — John Gilbert has been the fulfilment of one of my highest ideals of excellence in the dramatic art; and it would be hard if I could not now say this, if not with eloquence at least with fervor. I am aware of a certain strangeness, however, in the thought that words, in his presence and to his honor, should be spoken by me. The freaks of time and fortune are, indeed, strange. I cannot but remember that, when John Gilbert was yet in the full flush of his young manhood and already crowned with the laurels of success, the friend who is now speaking was a boy at his sports — playing around the old Federal Street Theater, and beneath the walls of the Franklin Street Cathedral, and hearing, upon the broad causeway of Pearl street, the rustle and patter of the autumn leaves as they fell from the chestnuts around the Perkins Institute and the elms that darkened the somber, deserted castle of Harris's Folly. With this sense of strangeness, though, comes a sense, still more striking and impressive, of the turbulent, active, and brilliant period through which John Gilbert has lived. Byron had been dead but four years, and Scott and Words-

worth were still writing, when he began to act. Goethe was still alive. The works of Thackeray and Dickens were yet to be created. Cooper, Irving, Bryant, Halleck, and Percival were the literary lords of that period in America. The star of Willis was ascending, while those of Hawthorne and Poe were yet to rise; and dramas of Talfourd, Knowles and Bulwer were yet to be seen by him as fresh contributions to the literature of the stage. All these great names are written now in the book of death. All that part of old Boston to which I have referred — the scene equally of Gilbert's birth and youth and first successes, and of his tender retrospection — has been swept away or entirely changed. Gone is the old Federal Street Theater. Gone that quaint English lane, with the cosey tobacconist's shop which he used to frequent. Gone the hospitable Stackpole, where, many a time, at "the latter end of a sea-coal fire," he heard the chimes at midnight from the spire of the Old South Church! But, though "the spot where many a time he triumphed is forgot," his calm and gentle genius and his hale physique have endured in unabated vigor, so that he who has charmed two generations of playgoers still happily lives to charm the men and women of to-day. Webster, Choate, Felton, Everett, Rantoul, Shaw, Bartlett, Lunt, Hallet, Starr King, Bartol, Kirk — these and many more, the old worthies of the bar, the bench, and the pulpit, in Boston's better days of intellect and taste! — all saw him, as we see him, in the silver-gray elegance and exquisite perfection with which he illustrates the comedies of England. His

career has impinged upon the five great cities of Boston, New Orleans, Philadelphia, London, and New-York. It touches, at one extreme, the ripe fame of Munden (who died in '32), and — freighted with all the rich traditions of the stage — it must needs, at its other extreme, transmit, even into the next century, the high mood, the scholarlike weight, and the pure style of the finest strain of acting that Time has bestowed upon civilized man. By what qualities it has been distinguished this brilliant assemblage is full well aware. The dignity, which is its grandeur; the sincerity, which is its truth; the thoroughness, which is its massive substance; the sterling principle, which is its force; the virtue, which is its purity; the scholarship, mind, humor, taste, versatile aptitude of simulation and beautiful grace of method, which are its powerful and delightful faculties and attributes, have all been brought home to your minds and hearts by the living and conquering genius of the man himself! I have often lingered in fancy upon the idea of that strange, diversified, wonderful procession — here the dazzling visage of Garrick, there the woful face of Mossop; here the glorious eyes of Kean; there the sparkling loveliness of Woffington, Abington, Jordan, and Nesbitt — which moves, through the chambers of the memory, across the old and storied stage. The thought is endless in its suggestion and fascinating in its charm. How often, in the chimney-corner of life, shall we — whose privilege it has been to rejoice in the works of this great comedian, and whose happiness it is to cluster around him to-night in love and

admiration — conjure up and muse upon his stately figure, as we have seen it in the garb of *Sir Peter*, and *Sir Robert*, and *Jacques*, and *Wolsey*, and *Elmore!* The ruddy countenance, the twinkling gray eyes, the silver hair, the kind smile, the hearty voice, the old-time courtesy of manner — how tenderly will they be remembered! how dearly are they prized! Scholar! — Actor! — Gentleman! Long may he be spared to dignify and adorn the stage — a soother of our cares, a comfort to our hearts, an exemplar, a benefactor, a friend! — the Edelweiss of his age and of our affections!

Where, pure and pale, the starlight streams
  Far down the Alpine slope,
Still through eternal winter gleams
  The snowy flower of hope:
Undimmed by cloud, undrenched by tears,
  So may his laurel last —
While shines o'er all his future years
  The rainbow of the Past!

Far, far from him the mournful hour
  That brings the final Call,
And o'er his scenes of grace and power
  Fate lets the Curtain fall!
And, oh, when sounds that knell of worth,
  To his pure soul be given
A painless Exit from the earth,
  And Entrance into Heaven!

Gilbert joined Wallack's company in 1862, and he was made stage-director of that theater in 1865. I had seen and admired him in previous years, upon the Boston stage, but from the time of his advent at Wallack's until the end of his career it was my good fortune continuously to follow his professional life and to possess the privilege of his friendship—which was only interrupted by his death. He was not a demonstrative man, but he was appreciative, considerate, sympathetic, and full of kindness. Upon this aspect of his character it is a comfort and a pleasure now to dwell, and I shall incorporate into this sketch letters and personal souvenirs that tend to show him in the gentle light of his own affectionate disposition and loving and lovable conduct. Unfortunately but few of such relics were preserved by me; yet those that remain are eloquent, equally of his personal peculiarities, his thoughtful goodness, and his dignity, sweetness and worth.

The following letter was his response to my request that he would read a play. I cannot now remember either the origin of the piece or how it came to pass that I had asked him to examine it. Scores of these requests are pressed upon every man who is in a position to prefer them. He read—and from the judgment seat he answered, in these words:

"WALLACK'S, Oct. 26, 1871.

"MY DEAR WINTER: Can you tell me why so many people have the idea that they can write a play? I have read so many dreadful attempts that I

look upon myself as a victim. It has been my lot, in my position as acting-manager, to be obliged to toil through a mass of miserable rubbish which the writers (authors!) call plays. How individuals of even ordinary intelligence can waste their time in the composition of what they think (poor souls) are comedies surpasses my comprehension. And, in addition, how insane they must be to suppose any manager would produce them! I have read carefully 'Hearts and Pockets,' and can only say it won't do. It is simply an elongated farce, and a very bad one at that. I will not attempt to criticise its merits as a literary production—as that is not necessary. But as a comedy, *or* a farce, it has not a single requisite to recommend it to any theater. I hope the author is not a particular friend of yours, for I should be sorry to say anything to hurt your feelings; but 'Hearts and Pockets,' either as a newly discovered 'old play' or one whose authorship is unknown, will never be the means of inducing him, the writer, to further attempts.

"I shall be most happy to receive a copy of your poems. I have heard many handsome things said of them. I have in my scrap-book several gems from your graceful pen, which I carefully treasure. I hope you are well.

"Very sincerely yours,

"JOHN GILBERT."

Even through his resentments he was lovable in his unconsciously humorous candor. The following letter was intended to be severe. I had written adversely, and perhaps impatiently [for it is hard to be patient all the time], about a queer performance of "Hamlet" which had been given at Wallack's Theater, (May 31, 1883, matinée). Gilbert played *Polonius*, reviving the part after many years of disuse, and he was imperfect

in it. But for the vexation of great weariness, however, I should not have dreamed of referring to even the slightest of the veteran's defects. He had forgotten more about acting than I ever knew, and he was entitled to the privilege of his supremacy. What I said was of no consequence, but his ingenuous remarks upon the matter are delightful and ought not to be withheld from the lovers of his memory. This was his letter:

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway,
"June 3, 1883.

"MY DEAR WINTER: I was very much surprised and not a little pained last evening in reading your notice in the *Tribune* of Friday on the performance at the Star Theater the previous afternoon. I am too old an actor to be much annoyed by remarks inimical to my personations. Acting is said by some to be a mere matter of opinion: I don't think so. My acting may by some be thought to be crude, feeble, colorless. That is the opinion of the writer, and he has a perfect right to it. That I do not dispute. But to be charged with being inaccurate in the text—I utterly disclaim.

"T is upwards of twenty years since I last went upon the stage as *Polonius*. I don't pretend to say I ever acted it; but the kind public led me to believe I afforded them some satisfaction, and the representatives of *Hamlet* of those days were just enough to say that I had some idea of the old courtier. Among the number I will name Mr. Macready. I never intentionally neglected any characters that I have been called upon to represent, however worthless they may have been. My duty to the public and my obligations to my manager would prevent that. But the language of Shakespeare, to me, is too sacred to be trifled with.

But there may be occasions when an artist is not master of his forces. This was my position on Monday last. I was very ill that day and was fitter for my bed than making a *show* of myself to the public. Had I taken the advice of Mrs. Gilbert I would have been there. I should hope that my friends when they found I was 'feeble and colorless,'—a fault that is not often laid at my door,—would suppose that something was wrong, and make some allowance for my delinquencies.

On Monday I shall leave the city for my summer home at Manchester-by-the-Sea, Mass. With the kindest feelings I am ever very sincerely yours, etc.,

"Wm. Winter, Esq. JOHN GILBERT."

The slight touch of petulance, the exhibition of querulous dissatisfaction, the hasty spark of resentment, the resolute devotion to the old-fashioned ideas and ways and standards — these were essential elements of his upright and downright character; and nothing could be more pleasing than the perfect candor with which they are indicated in this and other of his letters. It was always right to defer to him — for, however choleric or crusty he might now and then become, he was at heart sound, wholesome, gentle, and thoroughly human. This resentful letter was answered in a respectful and affectionate manner,— whereupon came the response appended; like sunshine after a retreating storm:

"MANCHESTER-BY-THE-SEA, Mass.,
"June 14, 1883.

"MY DEAR WINTER: Your very pleasant letter I rec'd a few days since and being long in getting my house to rights I have delayed replying until to-day.

"I thank you very much for your kind words, which I have never doubted. I always esteemed you as one of my best friends. In all your notices of my professional work you have universally been most considerate and kind, however little deserved; and, ungenial as are many of the characters I have been called upon to assume, you have treated me with generous consideration.

"In the class of character which I esteem myself best suited for, both in fitness and temperament, your criticisms have given me great satisfaction and pride. I have the most of them in my scrap-book, to which I refer with kindly recollections of the writer. 'In this I bury all unkindness, Cassius,'—if such a feeling ever existed.

"I met in Boston, our mutual friend, Wm. Warren. I was glad to see him. T is nearly three years since I had that pleasure. He told me he was in good health, but he looked considerably thinner, but otherwise he was the same genial Warren I have ever known. I am sorry that he had done acting for a year. I fear he will miss the accustomed excitement and will not be as well for it. There is nothing like work.

"I have nothing of particular moment to write about, but that the country looks fresh and green and that the air is pure and exhilarating, which I hope to benefit by.

"My dear William, I hope that this will find you in the enjoyment of good health, for which I pray a long continuance. With my kind regards to Mrs. Winter, believe me to be, my dear Winter.

"Always and sincerely yours,

"Wm. Winter, Esq. JOHN GILBERT."

The letter that follows is again touched with the veteran's choler; yet again it bears with it its own justification:

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway,
"May 25, 1884.

"MY DEAR WINTER: I rec'd the proof of the article you have written on Mr. Wallack, and made a few slight additions and added to the list of characters some thirty other parts. The sketch is very interesting and comprehensive. I will send it to *The Tribune* office early in the week.

"I am at present playing with Mr. Wallack, as I suppose you know, though no publicity is given to my name and any other player would have as well answered the purpose; the advertisement being devoted to the Star, and a not very graceful recognition of an artist so well known and esteemed (as the public have been pleased to express) as I am. However, we live and learn, and even at my age I am sometimes astonished.

"Did you observe in last Sunday's issue of *The Times*, the 18th, a brutal notice regarding old actors — that 'old players are beginning to find out that a drama can get on without them, and that young blood is coming rapidly to the front; it received its opportunity through the ridiculous price put upon itself by the older blood'? This is false. The rise in salaries has been caused by the new school of managers rushing madly after any young man who, with fair ability, makes a tolerable success in a new, attractive play. My profession has fallen low enough, and will continue to do so while the baby, goody-goody drama of Madison Sq. flourishes.

"At the end of this week I shall go to Boston, on my way to Manchester, where I hope to forget the annoyances of the past season. I shall play two weeks at the Boston Museum, to begin Oct. 6, with the old comedies, and shall return to New-York some time in November. But when the regular season at Wallack's opens I cannot say. The bright spot of the theatrical

year has been in witnessing the acting of Mr. Irving, Miss Terry, and that admirable company. I am glad that you are busy on a history of the American stage, for which no man has the knowledge and taste to be mentioned with you. You ask for a list of the characters I have represented. The journal in which I have recorded them I sent, with some valuables, to the Safe Deposit, until next fall. They number about fifteen hundred,—as I put down every one I ever went upon the stage for. It is curious, if only from the number.

"I hope, my dear Winter, when we meet, to find you in the enjoyment of good health. With kind respects to Mrs. Winter, and much love to yourself,

I am ever sincerely your friend,

Wm. Winter, Esq. JOHN GILBERT.

One of his favorite books was Henry Taylor's great dramatic poem of "Philip Van Artevelde." He sent to me a copy of it, inscribed as follows:

"To my dear friend William Winter, with the greetings of the season, from John Gilbert, January 1, 1885, New-York."

With this came an interesting letter which by chance touches upon his professional experience in London:

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway.

"MY DEAR WINTER: I have searched nearly all the New-York book-stores for a good copy of Taylor's Dramatic Poem of 'Philip Van Artevelde,' but in vain. Therefore I have no alternative but to send you the accompanying volume. For many years I have been in the habit of reading certain passages, which

to me are of surpassing beauty. No doubt you have read the work, so it is superfluous for me to say anything about it. Will you kindly receive it as a small remembrance of the kind feelings of an old friend.

"JOHN GILBERT.

"P. S.—A Happy New Year, and thank you for the Xmas card you sent me.

"I acted in this play—the first part—at the Princess's Theater, London, in 1848, Mr. Macready playing *Philip Van Artevelde*—a matchless performance! But 'the play pleased not the million; 't was caviare to the general.' As I remember it was played but ten or twelve times.

"Wm. Winter, Esq., January 1, 1885."

A precious souvenir of him is a little book called "Pickings from a Pocket of Pebbles,"—on which he has written: "Wm. Winter, Merry Xmas, John Gilbert, 1885." This is a treasury of thoughts, selected from the writings of the Rev. William B. Philpot. At about the same time he wrote as follows:

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway,
"December 21, 1885.

"MY DEAR WINTER: 'T is many a long day since I had the pleasure of taking my dear friend by the hand. 'Seas have rolled between us.' I hope that these few lines may find you in the enjoyment of good health. The enclosed lines were sent to me by an unknown friend. They are very complimentary and I feel flattered that they were written. The writer, in his letter to me, says:

"'The scrap of verse, done when the writer was at college, has lately come to light in an old number of the *Yale Courant*, and I send it to you at the instance of a friend who thinks that, however crude the ideas

may seem to me at this time, you should at least know of the feelings that caused them to be written. Please accept them, such as they are, as an effort at least to express something of the writer's ever-increasing appreciation and regard.'

"If you think them worthy publication it will gratify me very much to see them in *The Tribune*.

"I wish you would come and see me. You may generally find me at home afternoons and almost always on Sunday. Very sincerely your friend,

JOHN GILBERT."

These are the lines,—which were duly reprinted, according to his wish, by the editor of *The Tribune*. The authorship is unknown to me, but the poem is signed with the name of IDAS:

JOHN GILBERT.

THE play was done;
  The mimic lovers of the stage
Were safe united, with their mimic battles won;
  But while the prompter closed his well-scored page,
And on his bell a willing finger laid,
  An old man, stately, kind and hale,
In mold of country fashion made,
  Set forth the moral of the tale.

Much bent with time,
  The frost that silvered on his brow
Had left its markings, lined and figured like the rime
  Which on the pane the warming noon-day glow
Has smoothed and softened with its cheery smile.
  And while he spoke they lent him willing ears;
For warmest youth of heart the while
  Shone through the winter of his years.

'T was not the words —
  For they were simple as the tales
Some good old nurse's well-taxed memory hoards
  Against the time when fairy folk-lore fails.
He spoke in well-worn terms of good advice;
  How fathers should not draw too ready rein,
Nor sons take umbrage in a trice
  At fathers' counsels; these and more again.

But as he spoke
  The threadbare words they knew so well,
Came rippling streamlets of applause that broke
  In throbbing oceans as the curtain fell.
For youth and age, pride, poverty, e'en sin,
  Fair maid and bloodless pedagogue —
All felt the world of nearer kin,
  The while John Gilbert spoke the epilogue.

In January, 1886, suddenly and in a terrible manner the blight of affliction fell upon me and mine. No other word need be said of this except that his heart was with me in that dark hour.

"The Winchester, 1244 Broadway,
"January 26, 1886.

"My Dear Winter: I only heard last night of your terrible affliction. Believe me I condole with you in this sudden bereavement. I pray God that he will give you strength to bear it. It is only to him that we can look for comfort in our misery. I would say more but that words are inadequate to express my heartfelt sympathy for you and Mrs. Winter.

"Affectionately your sincere friend,
"John Gilbert."

In the course of that year (on April 5, 1886, being my boy's birthday), a commemorative library was established by me, each volume of which bears this inscription:

THE ARTHUR WINTER MEMORIAL LIBRARY.
FOUNDED A. D. 1886.
IN THE STATEN ISLAND ACADEMY AND LATIN SCHOOL
AT STAPLETON, STATEN ISLAND,
BY WILLIAM WINTER AND ELIZABETH
CAMPBELL WINTER
TO COMMEMORATE THEIR BELOVED SON,
ARTHUR:
ONCE A STUDENT HERE.
BORN APRIL 5, 1872. DIED JANUARY 24, 1886.

"Thou art fled
Like some frail exhalation which the dawn
Robes in its golden beams. Ah, thou hast fled:
The brave, the gentle, and the beautiful,
The child of grace and genius . . . .

"Art and eloquence
And all the shows of the world are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their light to shade."
— SHELLEY'S ALASTOR.

To this library Gilbert presented the works of Sir Walter Scott, in twenty-four volumes; the works of George Eliot, in twelve volumes; the works of Ma-

caulay, in eight volumes; the "Spectator," in eight volumes; the works of Jane Austen, in five volumes; and the poems of Crabbe, in one volume. In the volume of Crabbe's poems — a fine edition from the press of John Murray — he wrote as follows:

"With love and sincere sympathy for my dear friend William Winter.

"'If it be now 't is not to come; if it be not to come it will be now; if it be not now yet it will come: the readiness is all.' JOHN GILBERT.

"New-York, March 30, 1887."

In the volume of Scott's "Ivanhoe," he wrote:

"With deep sympathy for my dear friend William Winter.

"'There 's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.' JOHN GILBERT.

"New-York, March 30, 1887."

In November, 1887, he presented to the Arthur Winter Memorial Library his copy, in two volumes, of Doran's "Annals of the English Stage," addressing to me the following commendatory and characteristic letter:

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway,
"New-York, November 18, 1887.

"MY DEAR WINTER: I hope the accompanying books, 'Doran's Annals, &c.,' will be an acceptable addition to the Arthur Winter Memorial Library. I suppose you are conversant with the work. I have

enjoyed these volumes many times. They seem to me to be a faithful history of the English stage down to Edmund Kean. Several chapters are particularly interesting. The one devoted to Thomas Betterton is especially so. What a noble actor and grand old man he must have been! I hope the book will please you. I cannot close this letter without expressing the pleasure your notice of my first appearance this season gave me. I feel that they are the sentiments of a true friend. I could have wished the character had been more worthy of the kind reception given me by my friends and the public. Hoping you are in the enjoyment of good health I am, my dear Winter, your sincere old friend, JOHN GILBERT.

"William Winter, Esq."

At Christmas, 1886, he sent to me a copy of the handsome reprint of Washington Irving's sketch of Rip Van Winkle, published by Messrs. Scribner and Welford, with illustrations by Gordon Browne. On the fly-leaf of that he had written:

"To my dear William Winter, with kind wishes and Christmas greetings from his old friend,

"1886. JOHN GILBERT."

One of his latest remembrances was a copy of "Vagrom Verse," by Charles Henry Webb (John Paul), on the fly-leaf of which he wrote:

"To William Winter. From his old and sincere friend, John Gilbert. A Happy New Year. January 1, 1889."

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway,
"May 29, 1889.

"MY DEAR FRIEND WINTER: Your very kind invitation to visit you next week I sincerely regret to say I cannot avail myself of, as I have already arranged to leave for Boston on Tuesday morning, as Mrs. Gilbert's health is so delicate that her doctor peremptorily commands that it is of vital importance that she should have change of air. I need not tell you how delighted I should have been to pass a day at your home and renew kind thoughts and words. I will hope that on my return I may be able to meet my dear friend.

"I met our mutual friend Mr. J. Sleeper Clarke, who had just arrived from London, and we fought our old battles over again; in which you were lovingly remembered. I gave him your address and you will probably hear from him.

"My dear Winter, thanking you for your thoughtfulness in desiring 'so poor a man as I' to visit you, I shall always cherish your kindness.

"Last night closed thirty-five years of Wallack's Theater. The end is sad! I fear to say it was inglorious. He was the *last* actor manager. What are we to look to in the future? Managers may change, may die, but my noble art never!

"If you could spare time I should be glad to hear from you at my summer home.

"With sincere love I am ever truly yours,
"JOHN GILBERT."

"THE WINCHESTER, 1244 Broadway,
"April 10, 1889.

"MY DEAR FRIEND WINTER:

"I received your book, to the Memory of John McCullough — a very graceful tribute to a worthy man and excellent actor. I shall treasure it with other

dramatic biographies of the honored ones of my profession. I thank you for your friendly remembrance of me.

"No doubt but that you were shocked, as I was, when the report came of the serious attack of our friend Edwin Booth,— which, thank Heaven, was an exaggeration. I have called on him and found him to be in excellent health — though somewhat fatigued — and good spirits. May he continue so! His loss would be irreparable. I trust you are in good health. With very kind wishes I am very sincerely your old friend,

"JOHN GILBERT.

"W. Winter, Esq."

The following tribute to him was written by me, in *Harper's Weekly*, on the sudden reception of both bad news and good — shortly before his death — and to record the placing of Mr. Hartley's bust of him in the club-house of the Players:

When the news lately came from Boston that John Gilbert was seriously, perhaps dangerously ill in that city — where he had paused on his journey from New-York to his sea-side home at Manchester — this community suffered a shock of sorrow and felt the burden of great anxiety; and when a little later the convalescence of the famous actor was announced there was joy in every heart. John Gilbert, born in Boston, February 27, 1810, is in his eightieth year, and

an illness less formidable than pneumonia, with which he was overtaken, is serious to any man of fourscore. Gilbert, making his first appearance upon the stage on November 28, 1828, at the Tremont Theater in Boston, and remaining in the dramatic profession ever since, is one of the best-known and best-beloved of actors, and the thought of losing him cast a bleak chill upon our lives. Gilbert's life and character, like his public services during a professional career of nearly sixty-one years, are a precious possession to the world. He has lived a good life. His character is not less noble and venerable than it is quaint and sweet. And as an actor he is unrivaled in his special field — which is that of old men. Indeed, when Blake and Warren and Fisher and Howe are excepted, he never has had any rivals in our time. The latest actor who resembled him, and who might have been his competitor, was the English actor William Farren — the elder of that name — who died in 1861, aged seventy-five. But Farren, according to all that is recorded and remembered of him, was inferior to Gilbert in mind and in original personality as well as in variety of talent. William Rufus Blake was the only formidable competitor that Gilbert ever had to encounter, and Blake, who perhaps never equaled him as an artist, could excel him only in the coarser characters of unctuous humor, such as *Lord Duberley*, or in characters of great tenderness and pathos, like *The Last Man*. As the old man noble, or the old man eccentric, or the old man choleric — as *Mr. Dornton*, or *Mr. Hardcastle*, or *Sir Anthony Absolute* — he stands alone. As *Sir*

Peter Teazle he has filled the ideal of that famous character for the play-goers of nearly two generations, and as *Sir Peter* he will pass into history. The bronze bust of him, made by Mr. John S. Hartley, and recently placed in the hall of the Players, shows him in that character, and is a prized adornment of the beautiful club-house, founded by Edwin Booth, that was dedicated and opened on the last night of 1888.

It was not as an actor of old men that John Gilbert began his career, but as a juvenile tragedian — playing *Jaffier* in Otway's splendid tragedy of "Venice Preserved." It was in tragedy that Gilbert then and for some time afterward desired to excel, and theatrical records associate his name with such parts as *King John*, the *Ghost of King Hamlet*, *Shylock*, *Sir Edward Mortimer*, *Penruddock*, *Adrastus*, *Iago*, *Matthew Elmore*, *Wolsey* and *Macbeth*. But he began to play old men when he was only nineteen years old, and even then he displayed a special aptitude for that line of professional business — which he has followed ever since. His name will always remain identified with *Sir Peter Teazle*, *Sir Robert Bramble*, *Sir William Dorrilon*, *Lord Ogleby*, *Job Thornberry*, *Jesse Rural*, and kindred characters. He enacted a wide range of Shakespearean parts, including *Polonius*, *Malvolio*, *Sir John Falstaff*, *Adam*, *Autolycus*, *Caliban*, *Jaques*, and *Menenius*. His presentment of *Polonius* [which he gave for the last time on the occasion of the performance of "Hamlet," on May 21, 1888, at the Metropolitan Opera House, New-York, in honor of Lester Wallack] is remem-

bered as perfect — the exact portraiture of a man who has been wise and who remains kind, gentle and elaborately ceremonious. But his absolutely unique embodiments have been those of choleric character and antique manners. He always made a point of identifying himself, when acting, with the spirit and the essential life of the period of his part. He could play *Sir Epicure Mammon* — hard, unlovely, arrogant, luxurious, sensual — and he could play *Jesse Rural* — affectionate, gentle, paternal, venerable, simple, and altogether lovely; and he was perfectly truthful in both. His old men were old and they were true, but they were widely diversified. He was never monotonous. Each person that he assumed was seen in a distinct identity and felt to be living from his own peculiar center, with his own peculiar environment and background and experience and horizon and views. Gilbert may never act again: but his gracious figure, his expressive face, his winning voice, his beautifully clear and correct enunciation of our language, his symmetrical assumptions of character, his blended dignity, grace, refinement, humor, and sweetness will be treasured in the memory of play-goers as long as anything good and noble is remembered with love and honor.

It is not practicable within the limits prescribed for this memoir to give a circumstantial history of Wallack's Theater, with which John Gilbert was so long and so honorably associated; neither is it practicable here to give a particular description of each of the more prominent and more famous impersonations with which his name is identified in the chronicle of our stage. Much interesting material might be found along both those lines of narrative and commentary. For thirty years or more Wallack's Theater was at the head of the dramatic movement in the metropolis of America, and although it is now past away and the light of its renown is fading, it will long be remembered by those who revere genius and who honor noble achievement. Wallack's Theater was first opened on September 8, 1852. It stood in Broadway a little way below the southwest corner of Broome street. The eminent actor James William Wallack, a man proficient alike in tragedy and comedy, was its founder and manager. Its first removal placed it at the northeast corner of Broadway and 13th street, where it was opened on September 25, 1861. There the late Lester Wallack, on the death of his father, at Christmas, 1864, became its manager. On January 4, 1882, it was established at the northeast corner of Broadway and 30th street, and in that building its career was fulfilled and completed. The last performance ever given on any stage by Wallack's company, including John Gilbert, occurred at Wallack's Theater on May 5, 1888. The play was "The School for Scandal."

Gilbert acted *Sir Peter Teazle*, and the company was called out twice at the end of the piece, with loud cheers. Gilbert had an affectionate welcome, and, on being twice recalled after the screen scene, he said these words:

"I wish that Mr. Wallack could have addressed you to-night, but you must accept me as his substitute. It is now nearly twenty-six years since I joined his father's company, playing *Sir Peter Teazle* as my first part. In all these years it has been my greatest pride to have had your kindness, your appreciation, your indulgence, and I think I may add, your friendship. The success of the series of revivals during the last two months has been exceedingly gratifying to me, for it has shown that appreciation of the standard old plays is not extinct. I should have been very sorry if the New York public — *my* public — had determined to shut their eyes and ears to standard works. I regret very much the final breaking up of the associations of twenty-six years. But I do not bid you farewell. There have been reports that I was about to retire. Why should I? I am old; but I don't believe you are wearied of me. (Cries of No! No!) Once more I thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your kindness."

The system on which the elder Wallack founded his theater was that of the stock-company, and to that system Lester Wallack adhered almost to the last. The closing days of Wallack's Theater, however, were precarious, perplexed, and heavy — denoting only too well the broken fortunes of its honored master [Lester Wallack, b. Dec. 31, 1819; d. Sept. 6, 1888]. Daly's Theater, founded in 1869 by Augustin Daly, had now risen to the first rank, and close observers of theatrical

affairs had known for some time that this institution was destined to succeed Wallack's Theater and to reign in its stead. One significant sign of this vicissitude was the appearance of the Wallack company at Daly's Theater, which occurred on May 16, 1887. The engagement was for two weeks. It was devoted to "The Romance of a Poor Young Man," with Gilbert as the benign and humorous *Dr. Desmarets*, and it ended on May 28th. At a later time the veteran signified his disposition to join the stock-company at Daly's Theater, and had his life been prolonged this arrangement would probably have been made. The company with which he acted in Daly's Theater included the admired and esteemed actress Mme. Ponisi. The other members of it were Miss Annie Robe, Miss Fanny Addison, Miss Helen Russell, Miss C. Elberts, Miss E. Blaisdell, Mr. Kyrle Bellew, Mr. E. T. Henley, Mr. H. Hamilton, Mr. C. Herbert, Mr. W. H. Pope, Mr. H. Ayling, Mr. S. DuBois, Mr. J. W. Totten, and Mr. H. W. Perry. This was "all that was left of the mighty Saladin." Gilbert joined Mr. Jefferson's company in the season of 1888–'89, and on November 10, 1888, he appeared with that company, at the Fifth Avenue Theater, playing *Sir Anthony Absolute*, in Mr. Jefferson's condensed and adapted version of "The Rivals." *Sir Anthony Absolute* was the last part he ever played.

The following passage is an extract from a letter addressed to me by an old and honored citizen of Boston — one of Gilbert's lifelong friends — Mr. Curtis Guild:

"John Gilbert always took pride in Boston, the city of his birth. He was born in the old Atkins house, in Richmond street, at the north end — so noted in the colonial and revolutionary annals of the city. Charlotte Cushman was born in the same street. Gilbert loved to relate the experiences of his schoolboy days and to dwell on his remembrances of that picturesque quarter of the town, which was then a place of mansions, gardens, and quiet streets, and had not developed into the dusty, noisy, bustling city. He made his début at the Tremont Theater, Boston, November 28, 1828. How few there are who can recall the drama of those days; fewer still who acted in it. Walter M. Leman of San Francisco, of the old company, is still alive (1890), but the others are heard no more. Gilbert made a success, notwithstanding that he was a little confused, on his first entrance upon the stage, on recognizing the astonished face of his uncle glaring at him from the first tier of boxes. The next day came scolding, pleadings, and entreaties. His mother even went so far as to make her appearance in the green-room of the theater and beg the manager not to encourage her boy to become a play-actor. Gilbert, however, was firm in his determination, and he became a shining example that a 'play-actor' may also be a respected and honorable gentleman, the peer of any in social circles.

"One characteristic of Gilbert was that, off the stage, in his carriage, manner, and courtly bearing, there was that which impressed you as if he were one of those gentlemen of the old school whom he so grandly

represented; the *Sir Anthony Absolute*, *Sir Robert Bramble* sort of man, in modern dress. Courtly, stately, polite, with now and then a touch of fire, but kind-hearted, genial and well-bred — such was John Gilbert. In modern days Gilbert's impersonations were a revelation of what real acting is of such characters as *Sir Robert Bramble*, *Sir William Dorrillon*, *Lord Duberly*, *Old Rapid*, *Sir Abel Handy*, and *Old Dornton*.

"One of the most successful of his later engagements in Boston, in the representation of the old comedies, was filled at the Boston Museum in October, 1884, when he was supported by an excellent stock company, and when his performances attracted an unusually large number of elderly people, those who in the freshness of their youth and beauty had graced the dress-circle of the Old Tremont forty years before. At the conclusion of this engagement a reception was given to Gilbert by me, at my home in Mt. Vernon street, on Beacon Hill. This occasion was notable for the presence of a great number of representatives of Boston's old and best-known families, who united in giving to Gilbert their heartiest congratulations and renewing their recollections of the drama as it was when he and they were in the heyday of youth. This happy congregation of so many of the actor's former friends and admirers was exceedingly gratifying to the old comedian.

"On June 17, 1889, the veteran actor, who had been declining for about two weeks, passed peacefully away. 'With John Gilbert,' said one chronicle of his death 'has gone a part of Boston;—not Boston covered with ships and factories, shriveled into a dry-goods market, owned and obstructed by horse cars; not Boston redolent of Irish and Portuguese; but the clean, orderly, respectable old Boston, with its detached dwellings standing in sweet-smelling gardens, its streets sunny in winter and shady in summer; sea-girt

Boston, with its wharves lined with ships whose hardy navigators formed an important element in its neighborly population, proud of their birth and their traditions. Into this old town, before it was developed into a city, John Gilbert was ushered: he made his début upon the stage in the time of the elder Quincy.'

"Gilbert's funeral occurred on June 20, at the Church of the Unity, Rev. M. J. Savage, the pastor, officiating, and the assemblage was such a one as the actor might have chosen. There were old friends, that had known him in early and middle life; representatives of the old Boston families; professional friends; and lovers of the drama who came to pay a tribute of respect to one whom they had always honored, although personally unacquainted with him. The coffin bore the inscription: "John Gibbs Gilbert. Born Feb. 27, 1810. Died June 17, 1889." It was covered with wreaths and crossed palms, and surrounded with flowers. The pall-bearers were Col. Henry Lee, Col. W. W. Clapp, author of the History of the Boston Stage; Mr. Curtis Guild, Col. Samuel Hatch, Joseph Proctor, the tragedian, and G. S. Winston. The service was marked by a simplicity in keeping with the desire of the deceased. It consisted of the reading of passages from the Bible and other books, and an address, delivered by the Rev. Mr. Savage, on the life and character of the deceased actor. 'It is not often,' said the speaker, 'that one passes through a long career like his and from first to last, from early youth to old age, keeps such grand, such simple grasp on his own manhood. A member of a profession supposed at least to be surrounded by many dangers, and beginning that profession sixty years ago when, if tradition be correct, it was surrounded by even more temptations and dangers than it is to-day, he, in the grand self-respect of a noble manhood, has carried himself from first to last, with a robe unsullied,

with a character unspotted; and it is fit that we should remember this to-day and take account of the fact that they who will may find, anywhere and everywhere, a field for character, a field for noble service of their fellow-men.'

"The words of eulogy uttered by the pastor were supplemented by a prayer, and then the mortal remains of John Gilbert were borne to their resting place, in the beautiful Forest Hills Cemetery, near Boston."

The subjoined account of Gilbert's life, written by himself, appeared in the *New York Herald*, December 5, 1878:

"In that diary of my work [referring to a professional journal that he had kept for many years] is a record of upward of eleven hundred and fifty characters that I have personated. First appearances now and those of fifty years ago materially differ. Now it is more or less a question of influence, dress, and money. Then it was a matter of merit. For instance, when I wanted to go upon the stage (and I was as ambitious as anybody well could be), it was necessary for me to rehearse before a committee of judges. These consisted of three or four chosen friends of the management, who were supposed to possess more or less of judiciary power, and to exercise the same in considering the applications of all débutantes. It was a critical moment with me, for I was only eighteen years of age. Nevertheless, I passed the Rubicon, successfully rehearsing *Jaffier* in 'Venice Preserved,' *Sir Edward*

Mortimer, and *Shylock*. My first part was in the play I have first named. It was performed at the Tremont Theater on Friday evening, November 28, 1828. I was supported in this and in many subsequent performances by Mrs. Duff, one of the most beautiful and accomplished women then on the stage. Afterward I became a regular member of the Tremont Theater and was cast for a variety of parts. I remember that Edwin Forrest played in our company about this time. My earliest ambition was tragedy. Burton, the comedian, fell into a similar error, and was, like myself, only cured of his delusion by accident. 'Man proposes, but God disposes.' The truth is, young actors frequently make a mistake in depending on their unaided instincts, and it is only through a happy combination of circumstances that they sometimes hit upon the real field in life for which they are intended. I think I discovered my vocation during a tour through the South and West, which at that time was suggestive of anything but comfort. Traveling facilities were scant and the American drama was in its germ. I played *Sir Anthony Absolute*, *Master Walter*, and other characters in this vein, with such success as to determine my career.

"I claim Boston as my birthplace, and February, 1810, as the date. If I intonate clean, well-cut English, it is the result of study and habit. Charlotte Cushman was born next door, in Richmond street, a few years later, and we were lifelong friends. My christening and short clothes were followed by school days, first in the primaries, then at the old Mayhew school, and finally at the high school. Here they used to like my elocution on declamation days, and I am not sure that it did not have an effect on me. Afterward I went into a dry-goods shop with my uncle, but becoming weary of the business I learned some parts and went before the censors.

"In 1834 I played *Dornton* in the 'Road to Ruin,' at the Tremont; in 'Evadne,' the celebrated Mrs. Pelby taking the title part, and a great number of other parts. Barry was the manager. I think I was the last actor who spoke upon the boards of the old Tremont. When it was rebuilt it was opened with a hymn beginning, 'Lord, let these ransomed walls rejoice.' Subsequently I acted for a period at the Bowery. My first marriage was to Miss Campbell, in 1836, and with her, in 1846, I visited England. This was a new and comparatively unfamiliar phase of life; but I was warmly received by English people. I played an engagement at the Princess's Theater, opening as *Sir Robert Bramble*, in 'The Poor Gentleman.' If I had chosen to remain I might have done so with much profit; but 'blood is thicker than water,' and I preferred the faces of my own people; so that after a couple of years I returned. My old friend Tom Hamblin was then at the Park, and in September, 1848, I joined his company. In December the Park was destroyed by fire, when I went again to the Bowery. Then I returned to Boston and played a number of old men, at the Howard Athenæum. After that I moved to Philadelphia and acted at the Chestnut Street Theater, under Quinlan, in 1851. I remained there four years, playing such characters as *King John*, *Adrastus*, *Iago*, *Master Walter*, *Old Dornton*, *Sir Anthony Absolute*, and *Sir Robert Bramble*. In 1854 I returned to Boston, opened the Boston Theater with an address, surrendered my Philadelphia engagement and remained until recalled to Philadelphia in 1857, when I played in the Arch Street Theater.

"I joined the company at Wallack's Theater, New York, in 1862. The occasion was made memorable by the production of the 'School for Scandal,' with a strong cast. Lester Wallack played *Charles Surface*, and Charles Fisher *Joseph Surface;* I played *Sir Peter*.

I have remained with the company since that time and have been more or less identified with many of the plays put upon that stage.

"My first appearance as *Sir Peter* was in Natchez, Miss., when Miss Clara Fisher, now Mrs. Maeder, played *Lady Teazle*. In the tours made in early life I found little benefit accruing from constant change. Fortune blows hot and cold, and an actor's life is variable. Always preferring the quiet of a home, I determined nearly a generation ago to make and hold one. My associations with Wallack's Theater have been among the happiest in my life. I have experienced nothing but kindness and found only friendly hands to grasp.

"The improvements have in many respects been wonderful, especially in the matter of machinery and stage properties. In old times there used to be many incongruities: for instance, a Roman scene on one side of the stage and a sign of 'Tom and Jerry' on the other. Carpeting on the stage was not then known. I was once astonished to see that a piece of green baize had been spread on the boards for *Ophelia* to rest upon. In those days the people cared more for the strength of the play than they did for its surroundings, and even now, æsthetic as we have become, I have an idea that scenery is only a secondary consideration and does not of itself save a bad piece from condemnation. People like a pretty picture, but it satisfies only the eye, not the intellect.

"When I have a new character it gives me a world of work until I have thoroughly conquered the text. You have no conception of my feelings, occasionally, when, being assigned to an old part, I turn back to former casts and find that I am the only surviving member of the company. It sometimes makes me feel lonely. Belonging to the old school, as I do, my preference is not for what are known as modern society

comedies. Nevertheless, I don't believe in crowding the old plays down the public throat all the time. Change is both desirable and attractive.

"We have upon the stage at the present time (1878), excellent representatives of the profession, who, wherever the English language is spoken, would make reputations, as, for instance, Charles Thorne, James Lewis, Harry Becket, Agnes Booth, Mrs. G. H. Gilbert, Effie Germon. Mary Gannon was a marvel—exquisite. There is more individuality among the ladies of the profession than among the gentlemen. Characteristically they always seem to strike a light.

"I like society plays once in a while, although you see only a repetition of the life that is all about you; whereas in an old play you find something to admire as you do in an old picture; a chance to study costume and manners. Only a little while ago I saw nine gentlemen on the stage all dressed alike, from the waiter up to the hero. What illusion was there in this? If we are going to play the 'School for Scandal' we must play it according to tradition, for there can be no such character as a modern *Sir Peter Teazle* or *Sir Oliver Surface*. I believe in adhering to tradition and to the coloring of nature that attaches to a given dramatic period."

Gilbert had a fervent and scrupulous regard for his profession. He was a conservative. He especially believed in the principle of the stock company. The constitution and the habit of his mind are well denoted in the letter herewith given, which was ad-

dressed by him to a publication, now extinct, called *The New York Dramatic Review:*

"You ask me to describe the old system of stock companies, to show the merits of such a system and point out the vulnerable parts of the one that to a certain extent has supplanted it.

"The old stock company, in the general acceptation of the term, was an organization presided over by a manager, and composed of actors, actresses, scenic artist, and machinists, who gave their services when required to the manager, receiving in return a definite weekly salary, whether he utilized them or not. Nowadays such companies could not exist. The large salaries paid to artists, the lively competition maintained among managers, the advantages possessed by rival 'star' combinations, would militate very forcibly against the existence of such a company. But twenty years ago when stage managers like Calvert received four pounds a week, and when artists like Mathews, Farren, James Wallack, Sr., Buckstone, Howe, Strickland, Madame Vestris, Mrs. Glover, and Mrs. Nesbitt could be secured at reasonable salaries, it did not require a large expenditure of capital to maintain such a company; and the performances being uniformly good and remarkably well balanced, it was not difficult to command popular approval.

"When I say that stock companies could not exist to-day, you must not take me literally at my word, for apart from the fact that I am firmly convinced we are verging again toward the old system, there are, to say nothing of the stock companies at the Lyceum, the Haymarket, the St. James and the Adelphi, four such legitimate companies at present in this city. . . What I had in mind was the stock company as it once existed in England. If I remember correctly, when Charles Mathews, in 1838, was manager of the

Covent Garden Theater, at the time when Messrs. Keeley, Anderson, Farren, Bartley, Harley, and Cooper were a few of the members of his cast, there were six hundred persons connected with this theater upon the salary list. Of course this included the regular cast, an operatic company, the members of the orchestra, the corps de ballet, the supernumeraries, the stage hands, the scenic artists, the regular attachés and all others in any way connected with the house. But without taking into consideration the greater part of the above who are engaged now only when the exigencies of the theater demand it, the cast itself, in former times, was exceedingly large—that of W. C. Macready consisting of forty-six members (thirty men and sixteen women), all of them important players. When I tell you that a stock company of to-day rarely contains more than twenty persons, and that the number of subordinates is correspondingly diminished, you can easily see why, with their present proportions, the stock companies are enabled to exist.

"The merits of the stock company are manifold. They consist principally of the advantages accruing directly to the artists from their continued association with one another. In the early days a man did not appear suddenly on the stage as a full-fledged actor, as many do at present, but, on the contrary, accepted some inferior position which he retained for a year or more. From this he was advanced at the proper time. Did he manifest any extraordinary ability or display latent talent, his manager, always with an eye to his own interests, was quick to discern it and anxious to push him to the front. Though the pace at which he advanced was necessarily slow, the benefits he derived were invaluable. Having ample time to perfect himself in the minor lines of business, he was enabled to lay the groundwork of a highly artistic career. Conscious that upon his own exertions rested his only

hope of success, the endeavor to detect his errors and correct them, to discern his deficiencies and remedy them, became absorbing. Excellence in acting was to be obtained only by intelligent conception and ceaseless study, the last step presupposing every intermediate step; and the actor, perceiving this, redoubled his efforts in the hope of attaining eminence in his profession. The assumption, moreover, of so many different rôles rendered him versatile. In those days the actor accepted the rôle given him and played it intelligently. He was not marked by peculiarities nor characterized by individual eccentricities. On the contrary, he was a well-developed intellectual actor, in no wise mechanical, but versatile and thorough. Another merit was the uniform excellence which characterized the performance of successive plays. This sprang from the association, year after year, of the same persons in the same company, and was the result of the mutual understanding existing among the members. Again, the fact that the supply of members always permitted understudies was a guarantee that the play promised to the public would be given even if certain of the company were indisposed. And last, but not by any means least, must be mentioned the meritorious fact that the manager, having a large cast from which he could always draw at will, was enabled to select for any individual impersonation the artist best adapted to the part.

"Everything thus conduced to the development of dramatic art and the improvement of the actor. There could have been no more thorough school for dramatic training than the stock company, no more thorough teacher than the stage manager, and no more persevering artist than the actor. I might incidentally add that most of those who have attained eminence in histrionic art are the offshoots of this system.

"It is a peculiar fact that the demerits of 'star' systems correspond in great part to the merits of the old companies; that is, where we perceive merits in the old system we are almost sure to perceive, in the same particulars, demerits in the new. The old stock companies were the schools for dramatic art. As the new system has practically done away with the stock companies few such schools now exist. In consequence of this the versatility and intellectuality which once enabled actors to approach the limits of their art are now replaced by mechanical or automatic traits, while a tendency toward that which is artificial, in place of that which should be natural, is becoming every day more marked. To confirm my statement about the absence of schools, I cannot forbear quoting part of a conversation, by a reporter of a Manchester paper, with Mr. Henry Irving. Speaking of the available schools in which a young actor might learn his business, Mr. Irving, with great emphasis, said: 'Indeed, I don't know of any. As you are aware I have two sons, and one of them seems determined, poor lad, to be an actor. But I positively tell you that I, a London manager of some influence I believe, am utterly at a loss to know where he should get his dramatic training. If I bring him to my own theater I can only send him on the stage nightly as one of the crowd, with at the most a line or two to speak, and he would have to content himself for twelve months, or as long as the run of the piece lasted, with the repetition of that line. In the old stock days he would have joined the local company, where he would have had plenty of hard work and a well-varied repertory of parts to play; thence he might have been promoted and so onward, until he became an experienced and accomplished actor.'

"Two of the greatest faults of the star system which are forced upon one in a company's perform-

ance are first the frequent non-adaptability of the artists to the parts assigned them, and secondly the unevenness, or want of balance, in the representation. The first naturally arises from the manager's inability to make a judicious disposition of his cast; the second, from the inequality existing between the stars and their support.

"But enough of this. The system was born of the desire to save expense, and nourished by those who had no true taste or interest in the drama. But it cannot flourish. Already a revulsion in the feelings of managers is taking place, and it will not be long before, perceiving the injury they are doing, they will return to the old system and endeavor to right the wrongs they have committed.

"JOHN GILBERT."

Reference has been made [page 9] to the festivities that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Gilbert's first appearance on the stage. This occasion was further signalized by a dramatic performance, in his honor and for his benefit, given at Wallack's Theater on December 5, 1878. The playbill then used is here reproduced.

The multitude that assembled in Wallack's Theater to pay respect to the veteran, and to enjoy the ample and diversified performance given on that occasion was so numerous that it filled every part of the house, and the assemblage was one of an exceptionally brilliant character and appearance. Old playgoers abounded

and many ladies and children lent to the auditory the graceful charm of their beauty, refinement, and innocence. The long programme was carried out, with but the omission of a single feature — the Act, namely, of "The Danicheffs," which had to be discarded, at the last moment, in consequence of the illness of one of the actors. Dion Boucicault's play of "Kerry," in which the author himself acted with sentiment and skill, and "The Morning Call," with Lester Wallack as *Ardent*, and Miss Ada Dyas, who had a glad welcome, as *Mrs. Chillington*, were especially successful features of the day. The screen scene from "The School for Scandal" brought on Gilbert — who was welcomed with copious plaudits, often re-beginning as they died away, so that it was long before his voice could be heard. Gilbert's personation of *Sir Peter Teazle*, the flower of antique grace and the ripe fruit of tender feeling, quaint humor, and fine intellectual breeding, was seen at its best; the delicate humanity and the frolicsome glee finding excellent expression and a sympathetic response. Miss Rose Coghlan, Mr. Charles Barron and Mr. Charles Coghlan, who participated with Gilbert in this scene, were sharers in his recall and in the public tribute of pleasure. Gilbert, parting from these associates — with his characteristic, old-time courtesy, which pleased all and forgot no one — came forward as the curtain fell between them, and, in much agitation, delivered the following address:

This is an occasion when I scarcely know whether to confess that I am sad or joyful. That my heart

goes out to you, the public, and to the warm professional friends connected with this theater — with some of whom I have been continuously associated for the last seventeen years — need not be told in words. You and they all know it! Indeed, were I to attempt to express the emotions that are born of this peculiar event, language would be inadequate to describe the overflow of a grateful nature. And yet, as I stand here, looking into your faces, the memories of fifty years come trooping back upon me, like so many musty old volumes that have been long embalmed and suddenly are illuminated by the sunshine of this hour. If, under the circumstances, I feel a shadow of sadness gathering around me, it is because I see so many broad gaps in the circle of my old friends — gaps left by those who have passed into the spirit land! In these fifty years I have seen moving two great processions — one coming upon the stage to play their brief parts; the other passing silently away. I am looking, at this moment, in the faces of those whom I remember as little children twenty years ago. I see others — old friends and associates, dear comrades! who, like myself, are listening to the rustle of the autumn leaves and waiting for the winter time; and the very fact that I am so surrounded, that this anniversary — this "golden wedding," as somebody has called it — has brought us together, gives new strength and lends fresh warmth to an old man's heart. The life of an actor is, at best, a hard one; but (thanks to you, the patrons of Wallack's Theater; thanks to Mr. Wallack,— my manager, my comrade in art and, more than all, my dear friend,— and to the members of his company; thanks to *all* the members of the profession who have so generously coöperated in making this the happiest day of my life; thanks to the gentlemen of the Press, who have universally treated me with kindness and consideration) if ever I had a trouble in years

gone by it has been obliterated by this distinctive mark of appreciation! And, as I have done for nearly a quarter of a century, I shall feel that each successive year that passes in your presence is only another mile-stone wreathed with flowers! I do not deem it necessary to be reminiscent; for to begin the story would be like the opening of a book that could not be read in a single night. I therefore must content myself with simply conveying to you these utterances of a full heart. In the lines of America's great poet, Longfellow, I would say:

> "Whatever poet, orator, or sage
> May say of it, old age is still old age.
> What then? Shall we sit idly down and say
> 'The night hath come,— it is no longer day'?—
> The night hath *not* yet come; we are not quite
> Cut off from labor by the failing light.
> Something remains for us to do — or dare;
> Even the oldest tree some fruit may bear.
> For age is opportunity, no less
> Than youth itself, though in another dress;
> And, as the lessening twilight fades away,
> The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day."

Formal but not severe, stately without pomp, dignified without severity, formidable in its self-reliance and reticence, individual, positive, scrupulous and exact, but neither aggressive nor caustic, the personality of John Gilbert, although it impressed many of his acquaintances as exclusive and cold, was sincere, manly, gentle, and even tender. He had strong convictions. He was uncompromising. He never flattered anybody, and he never assumed a cordiality that he did not feel. His manner was usually urbane, but his temper was impetuous, and when offended by frivolity, professional incompetence, or sycophantic fawning,— three things which especially he detested,— he could express con-

tempt and scorn with energetic indignation and righteous vehemence. The profession of the actor was, in his esteem, sacred. He allowed no levity on that subject, and his anger was quickly aroused by any trifling with the dramatic art. "Acting, sir," he said to me, on one occasion,—and he wrote the same thought on another—"is often called a matter of opinion or of taste; it is nothing of the kind—it is a matter of fact." His meaning was that a competent actor gives a performance that is correct and right, and that its merit is independent of preference or caprice. He knew his art thoroughly, in every department of it and in every particular, and no one could teach him anything about it, —willing though he was to learn and always deferential to the authority of true intellect and honest thought. He perfectly understood, furthermore, the scope and the nature of his own abilities; so that, in his riper years, he never willingly undertook what he was unfitted to achieve, and he never failed to do well whatever he undertook to do at all. The traditions of the stage were known to him and he respected them—maintaining that they are the fruits of experience, and are rational and wise. Innovations were obnoxious to his judgment. The modern juvenile actor who plies the conspicuous wrist-band, poses on the hearth-rug, and continually toys with the incombustible cigar, impressed him as a vacuous impertinence. He required strong and distinct character, a definite ideal clearly expressed; fidelity to the text; accuracy in apparel; absolute concurrence with the manners of the time and of the society to be depicted; imagination and

sensibility in treatment; harmonious concentration of all the parts and elements in a performance; and pure and perfect use of the language. These things he invariably gave when he acted; and even toward the last, when his faculties had begun to fail, he seldom strayed from that absolute precision which for fifty years had been the conspicuous excellence of his art. The actor whom he most admired was Macready — a man of exalted genius, who preferred to pursue a severely accurate method rather than to depend upon the capricious gusts of inspiration. Macready in *Richelieu*, *William Tell*, *Werner*, *Virginius*, and *Macbeth* he declared to be perfection — never within his knowledge surpassed, or even rivaled. What he thus admired it was natural that he should emulate. He was sometimes a great actor; he was always a correct one. In such characters as *Sir Sampson Legend* and *Sir Anthony Absolute* no man of his time approached him, and it is doubtful whether, in this line of individuality, he was ever equaled. Those are unlovely characters, tyrannical and choleric, and they evoked only a part of the constituents of his ample and comprehensive nature. He acted them with ease and he was perfect in them, but for the fuller expression of his nature you had to see him as *Sir Peter Teazle*, *Sir Robert Bramble*, *Jesse Rural*, and above all as *Mr. Dornton*. The personations that he gave of these parts revealed the tenderness of his heart and the lovely refinement of his mind, commingled with a strain of humor which was now jocular, now whimsical, and at all times—certainly within the last fifteen or twenty years of his professional life — spon-

taneous, genial, and fluent. He had been a hard actor. He gave, for example, the best performance of *Caliban* that ever was seen in America — and there was in his method all that this fact denotes. But that quality of hardness gradually wore away, and in the latter part of his career he was never so fine as in characters of a venerable aspect, a gentle temperament, and a soft, benign, and winning manner. One of the best of his achievements was the embodiment of the *Abbé Constantin*, which he gave when his days were nearly ended. In the garden of his heart the last flowers that bloomed were still the sweetest, because they were the flowers of charity and love.

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